

OCTAGON HOUSE
WATERTOWN, WISCONSIN
Jefferson Co.

H.A.B.S. No Wis:135
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• PHOTOGRAPHS •
WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
DISTRICT No 28

Historic American Building Survey
Alexander C. Guth • District Officer
1249 North Franklin Place, Milwaukee, Wis.

OCTAGON HOUSE
Watertown, Jefferson and Dodge Counties, Wisconsin.

Owner. Descendants of John Richards

Date of Erection. 1853

Architect. Probably John Richards

Builder. John Richards

Present Condition. Fairly well preserved

Number of Stories. Four

Materials of Construction. Brick walls and chimneys. Wood
porticoes and cornices.

Other Existing Records. None known.

Additional Data. See following pages.

DATA NOT CONTROLLED AND NOT GUARANTEED
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Watertown Octagonal House.

This house is built some distance from the east limits of the city of Watertown, Wisconsin. The premises front on one of the main travelled arteries leading out of that city. The house dates from the year 1853 and was erected for one named John Richards, a lawyer and mill owner. From what has been learned, he made his own plans for the house. He was determined to erect the largest house in the state of Wisconsin. How near he came to fulfilling this ambition is a question, but nevertheless he did succeed in erecting a house of unusual size and distinction. The four floors contain thirty-two rooms all told, which is quite a number when one considers that but one family was to occupy the house, except the upper story which was planned and built to house the millhands.

It is of interest to note that each of the four floors, including the basement, contains the same number of rooms (8). And fourteen of these rooms are used for sleeping purposes. Every room in the entire house is oddly shaped in that they all have more than four walls.

The house was built over a period of three years. All material used in its construction was hauled by horse and wagon from the city of Milwaukee some forty miles distant. The present owner will tell you that the house originally cost \$50,000.00 to build, which of course

was a tidy sum for that purpose in the 1850's.

The house was built like a fort, strong and massive. Every room in the house, as mentioned before, is oddly shaped. But the unusual feature about the planning of the house is the inaccessibility of some of the rooms. A study of the plans reveals the astounding fact that to gain access to one of the bedrooms it is necessary to pass through two bed rooms and a connecting hall to get to the desired room.

The absence of bath rooms, except one which is a late addition to the house, should be commented upon. The fact also should be noted that each floor contains a water hydrant. From these the water was no doubt drawn and then carried to the various rooms in containers of some kind or other.

There are but few details of the old house that are inspiring, though it must be admitted that the door and window trim offers a good story of simple profiles. Then the front doorway is of more than passing interest. But the rest of the details at the structure are very commonplace. Whether they are Victorian or Jigsaw is left to the inquiring mind.

The spiral staircase occurs as exactly in the center of the house as was possible to place it. This is a masterpiece of the stair builder's art and many an

artisan today can well profit by making a study of it. 1-

Most of the narrow piazza extending around the house on two levels has been removed. This was continuous around the entire house and the two floors of the same were in no way connected which seems quite unusual.

The basement at one time contained an immense oven. Further investigation of this portion of the house has also revealed the fact that there was an elongated furnace located there which was capable of holding eleven foot long logs.

The house is in a fairly good state of preservation (1935) and is occupied by descendants of the original owner, consisting of an old mother, 93 years of age, and her "aged" son, 75 years old.

It may be of further interest to note that the now famous octagonal house at the "Century of Progress", which was termed the "House of Tomorrow", was an inspiration ~~from~~ this Octagonal House at Watertown. Such is fame.

Alvan C. Butth
Field Officer.

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Reviewed 1936, H.C. Foreman